

Stow School Building Committee

Annual Report for 2004

As a result of a meeting between the Stow School Building Committee (SBC) and the Board of Selectmen late in 2003, the SBC agreed to analyze and compare several options for elementary school building projects of varying costs and complexity. Early in 2004 the SBC developed background information for four long-term options including additions and renovation to the existing buildings (looking at both minimal renovations and complete renovations which would be eligible for SBA funding), a new PreK-2 on a new site combined with an addition to/renovation of Center, and a new PreK-5 on a new site. These options were evaluated based on overall cost, cost per square foot, the quality of the finished product, the eligibility of the project for state SBA funding, the disruption during construction, and the possibilities for expansion after the immediate 10 year timeline. After reviewing these options the SBC reached the following conclusions:

- Add/Reno at Pompo (with or without SBA) is not a cost effective or wise alternative because the site is too constricted and the building is too flawed.
- Renovation of existing buildings is a more expensive option than new construction.
- A new Pre-K to 5 (or at a minimum Pre-K to 2) should be built on a new site as soon as possible.

The SBC also agreed unanimously on the following recommendations:

- The Town should build a new school on a new site as soon as possible because this is the best and most cost effective long-term solution.
- The Town should use modular classrooms as a temporary measure to accommodate overcrowding until the new school is done.
- The town should act quickly to identify and purchase land for a new school since possible school sites in Stow are very limited (less than 10) and disappearing fast.

The SBC presented these options and recommendations to the Board of Selectmen in March of 2004. The Board of Selectmen did not agree with the findings of the SBC and subsequently decided to sponsor a separate warrant article for renovations and additions at Pompo and Center. The SBC held a series of public forums to discuss their recommendations and help educate the voters on the issues. The SBC sponsored several warrant articles relating to short and long term school needs. These were grouped together on a single night of town meeting along with the Selectmen's alternate school renovation article and two proposals for the purchase of the O'Grady property.

- Article 29 (sponsored by the SBC) requested \$230,000 for the purchase of a two classroom modular unit to accommodate short-term space needs at Pompo. This passed by more than 2/3 and also passed by the vote at the May 25th election.
- Article 30 (sponsored by the SBC) requested a transfer of \$35,000 of available SBC funds to pursue planning for a new school on a new site. This was approved.
- Article 31 (sponsored by the Board of Selectmen) requested \$7.5 Million for improvements and construction at existing schools. This did not receive the 2/3 majority needed to pass.
- Article 32 (sponsored by the Board of Selectmen) requested \$800,000 for partial acquisition of the O'Grady property. This was defeated.
- Article 33 was a citizen's petition recommending purchase of the full O'Grady property. This was defeated.
- Article 34 (sponsored by the SBC) requested a transfer of \$35,000 of available SBC funds to pursue land acquisition for a new school. This was approved
- Article 35 (sponsored by the SBC) requested \$100,000 for the removal of the risers of the amphitheatres at Pompo and conversion into classrooms. This was approved.

The SBC came away with a mixed mandate from the Town Meeting. While all the SBC sponsored articles passed, which implied support for the new school/new site concept, there had been some enthusiastic champions for the idea of reusing Center school and keeping "the campus concept" alive. Although the Board of Selectmen's 7.5 million dollar proposal was defeated, there was a sense in the SBC that a lot of people had come away confused about what the town's priorities should be and what the actual cost of additions and renovations would be. The SBC decided to focus first on an outreach project, meeting with all the town boards and holding public forums to try to determine the town's true feelings on the options for elementary school buildings.

At the start of the summer, the SBC began meeting with various boards and committees to learn what people were thinking about the SBC's progress to date. The SBC met with the Capital Planning Committee, the Finance Committee, the Planning Board, the Board of Selectmen, School Committee representatives, and Concerned Citizens of Stow. The SBC also held a public forum in October to hear the questions and concerns of parents and voters in general.

Several themes – some of them conflicting emerged from these outreach sessions:

- Concern that because of the physical limitations of the schools students are not getting the education they should be, are not getting a full share of time on the playground, and are not getting access to programs that are available at other schools in the district.
- Concern about the potential cost of a school building project and its impact on Stow's tax rate (especially for seniors and low income families).
- Interest in reducing the impact of additional taxes on those least able to afford it.

- Concern that the project was not done yet and frustration that Stow's students are being educated in an environment that is significantly substandard compared to other towns in our district.
- A feeling that Stow should try to renovate one or both of the existing schools rather than “throwing them away” and buying land to build a new school.
- A concern that the disruption of a renovation project (where would the students go during construction?) would pose major problems and should be taken seriously.
- Full support for a new school or renovated school as long as it accommodates the district’s educational objectives.
- Disagreement about the number of additional classrooms Stow will need over the next decade and beyond. Some feel the SBC’s enrollment projections are much too high compared to Stow’s growth over the last 10-20 years.
- Concern that the enrollment numbers might be too low given that the SBC is proposing a building that would open around 2010, and are using maximum enrollment projections which are based on 2013.
- Attitudes toward the Pompositticut School building are generally negative, primarily because of the disruptive environment and lack of traditional classrooms. Many people seem to think that a fire station and/or a Council on Aging facility would be a good use for the building.

Concurrently with its outreach program, the SBC began pursuing land options for possible new construction. The SBC had already done preliminary evaluations of three possible sites, all of which were large enough for a new school. These parcels are currently owned by the O’Grady, Kane, and Quirk families.

An Active Adult Neighborhood (AAN) had already been approved for the O’Grady parcel. Before the Town Meeting last Spring, the SBC explored the possibility of sharing the O’Grady site with the AAN. The SBC voted to recommend the purchase of the full or partial site and gave this recommendation to the Board of Selectmen. The full parcel would have been ideal for a school, and the partial site would have been a viable site for a school. Town Meeting chose to preserve the AAN and agricultural use that were planned for the site.

The Quirk parcel was also large; however, the site is compromised by the presence of a drumlin and wetlands, and was not recommended as a site for a school.

The Kane parcel is very large and could likely provide a good site for a new school. Because of wetlands and limited street access the site would be more expensive to develop than an ideal site (such as O’Grady). The SBC decided to determine the cost to deal with the challenge of building at Kane in order to do a cost comparison between a new school at Kane with the Center campus approach. The study showed that while development at Kane is more expensive than at Center (or a flat dry site) the dollar difference is in the same range as the added cost of an addition/renovation project compared to new construction. The Kane property is under consideration as a possible

new site for a PreK-2 or PreK-5 school. The SBC has commissioned schematic plans for both these options.

Several residents asked if the SBC is considering conservation land. The Committee met with the Chairman of the Open Space Committee and others with expertise in this area and learned that taking land out of conservation is a serious legal and ethical matter. The state legislature must approve such a change. An even greater concern is the breach of faith with the landowner who expected that his/her property would remain under a conservation restriction in perpetuity. The SBC has no plans to pursue acquisition of conservation land.

After consulting with the Open Space Committee, the SBC identified about a dozen parcels that seemed possible as sites for a new school and sent letters to each of the owners to see if they had any interest in selling their land to the town. Only one additional parcel has been identified through this process and discussed. This is a 13 acre parcel which is smaller than the current Center site, but is flat and dry, and is a possible site for a new PreK-2 school that would be used in combination with a renovated Center 3-5 school.

After hearing the strong feelings expressed about the Center campus concept at town meeting and outreach meetings, and confirming the lack of available easily developed sites, the SBC decided to revisit the idea of an addition/renovation to provide a PreK-5 school at the Center site.

The SBC commissioned a conceptual plan from their architect Design Partnership of Cambridge (DPC) for an expanded renovated PreK-5 school at the Center site based upon the following parameters:

1. Provide an addition and renovation to the existing Center School to accommodate 37 classrooms (total) and all related support spaces to accommodate the district's educational objectives.
2. Determine whether the site would provide sufficient room for expansion to accommodate expected enrollment growth beyond the ten-year projections.
3. Provide cost estimates for all site development, construction, and furnishings.
4. A preliminary traffic study has been completed. The SBC decided not to request additional studies until we know what the site will hold.
5. Make the maximum use of the existing structure, including the evaluation of the possible addition of a second story.
6. Use existing plumbing, electrical, and HVAC where possible.
7. Consider expanding play spaces into wooded area behind current play field if necessary (flag and survey wetlands around Center and Hale to see if there is any useable land for play spaces.)
8. Provide recommendations on the pros/cons of this add/reno vs. razing Center and building new on the same lot.
9. Incorporate land now occupied by the fire station and the land behind it.
10. If the site seems large enough to hold a PreK-5 as described above:

- determine the type and location of a waste management system as required by the Department of Environmental Protection
- verify the presence of an adequate water supply
- verify that the location can handle the expected traffic with further studies

In addition to reviewing this study, the SBC walked all the possible parcels that are accessible from Center and had all the wetlands flagged by the Stow Conservation Commission and found that while there are some uplands that could be used for playing fields the total additional useable land area is only between 1/4 and 1/2 acre.

DPC produced two plans – first a large one based on a preliminary educational needs assessment from the School District, then another severely scaled down at the request of the School Building Committee. In reviewing the second, smaller option the committee noted the following concerns

- There was inadequate parking and no room to develop a traffic pattern that did not require the students to cross a traffic lane to get to the play space
- Play space was reduced from the existing Center school while the school population was more than doubled
- The building would be very large and potentially overwhelm the site. There was discussion about whether this was appropriate for Stow.
- There is no way to keep the grade K-2 separate from grades 3-5 as had been requested by the SBC and the School district to try to keep the feel of two smaller schools.
- The re-use of Center resulted in an inefficient floor plan with a very long narrow school resulting in long walks to the gym/cafeteria with various grades mixed together
- The smaller version did not provide adequate space for the enrollment projections and district's stated space requirements. There was concern that this school would be at maximum capacity as soon as it was built.
- The site is significantly undersized for a school building of this size. There would be no room for expansion beyond the 10 year projections.
- The school would have to be vacated during construction. There was concern that this would be very disruptive and would require the construction of an entire temporary school out of modular units on the site or at another location.

After reviewing all these factors the School Building Committee decided unanimously that the Center site was not a viable option for a preK-5 school. Currently the SBC is in the process of reviewing the other options available to the committee. These include:

- An add/reno to Center for grades 3-5 with a new PreK- 2 building on a new site
- A new PreK-5 building on a new site

The SBC is currently working to develop schematic plans and full pricing (including land purchase costs and site development costs) for these options in order to bring an informed recommendation to the voters in May.

The SBC is committed to developing a plan that meets the long-range needs of the Stow elementary schools in the most cost-effective manner. As Stow residents each member of the committee is well aware of the high taxes the town already pays, and is striving to minimize the financial impact of upgrading the schools. To do this, the SBC plans to apply for state building assistance before beginning any renovation or construction project even though this means that a project cannot begin before 2008 at the earliest.

The SBC plan for early 2005 is to review all the options that are available to Stow and determine which will provide the best and most cost effective long-term plan for an elementary school environment that would complement the excellent education currently offered to Stow Students. The SBC will bring their recommendations to the 2005 Town Meeting to obtain approval to proceed with implementation of the project. If they get approval from the Town, the SBC would then likely come back to Town Meeting to get funds for site purchases and to get appropriations for the more detailed building plans required for the 2007 submission for SBA funding.

In addition to this work on the long range planning, the SBC has spent the year managing amphitheatre conversions and the health and safety upgrades at Pompo and Center. This work was substantially completed in August on time and approximately \$210,000 under budget.